Petronius Maximus

(17 March 455 - 22 May 455)

SOURCES

The emperor Julius Valerius Majorianus, or Majorian, is known primarily from fragments of evidence found either in jejune chronicles, such as those of the Spaniard Hydatius and Count Marcellinus (an easterner who wrote in Latin), or in extracts from writers whose complete works do not survive, such as the Byzantine writers Priscus, John of Antioch, and Malalas. The most insightful source is Sidonius Apollinaris, a Gallic aristocrat who was the son-in-law of the emperor **Eparchius Avitus**. Sidonius met Majorian during the emperor's campaign in Gaul in 458-459, and had dinner with him at least once in early 461. Sidonius not only provides a revealing personal vignette of the emperor, but he also composed an extant verse panegyric that provides our only connected account of Majorian's personal history and is the best source for his activities before becoming emperor

In addition, Majorian's domestic policies are much better known than those of the other "shadow" emperors of the last years of the western Roman Empire because of the survival of several of his legislative enactments, known as "Novels", which were preserved in the Breviarium, a compilation of Roman law published by Gallo-Roman jurists in 506 under the authority of the Visigothic king Alaric II (484-507). These laws may have made their way into Gallic archives during the course of Majorian's stays in Gaul during the years 458-461. They demonstrate the increasingly pervasive problems that the emperors had with maintaining the functioning of the imperial bureaucracy as self-interest and corruption became more and more rampant among government officials.As in the case of all the so-called "shadow" emperors of the western Roman Empire, there is no surviving connected account of the reign of the short-lived emperor Petronius Maximus. His career must be reconstructed primarily from what evidence survives in the detritus of Byzantine works that themselves do not survive *in toto*. Most of this evidence deals with his accession, which was intimately associated with the murder of Valentinian III (425-455), and his death, which occurred just as the Vandals were about to sack Rome in 455.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Maximus seems to have embarked on a senatorial career *ca.* 411 A.D. by holding the office of *praetor*, which was by this time purely ceremonial and entailed the sponsorship of lavish and expensive circus games. *Ca.* 415, at the age of 18, he held the office of *tribunus et notarius*, an entry-level position as an imperial *factotum*. Subsequently, he held a series of high-level imperial appointments. *Ca.* 416-419 he served as *Comes sacrarum largitionum* (Count of the Sacred Largesses, or chief treasurer), and between 419 and 439 he was *Praefectus urbi Romae* (Prefect of the City of Rome) twice and *Praefectus praetorio italiae* (Praetorian Prefect of Italy). In 433 he became Consul, he served as Praetorian Prefect of Italy again in 439 (the same year that **Eparchius Avitus** was Praetorian Prefect of Gaul), and in 443 he held the consulate for the second time, an extremely distinguished honor. In 445 he gained the title of *patricius* (patrician), and this, coupled with his two consulates, would have made him the highest-ranking of all Roman senators.

In 454, Maximus was said to have been involved in a conspiracy to murder the Patrician and Master of Soldiers Flavius Aëtius, with whom Maximus had been competing for status. John of Antioch provided a fanciful and convoluted account of the reasons for Maximus' involvement:

"Valentinian, having fallen in love with the wife of Maximus, a senator, used to play at dice with him. When Maximus lost and was unable to pay, the emperor took his ring. Rising, he gave it to one of Maximus' friends so that the man showed it to Maximus' wife and, as though from her husband, ordered her to come to the palace to dine with him there. She came, thinking this the truth, and when it was announced to the emperor, he arose and without Maximus' knowledge seduced her. After the lovemaking the wife went to meet her husband as he came, wailing and reproaching him as her betrayer. When he learned the whole story, he nursed his anger at the emperor. Knowing that while Aëtius was alive he could not exact vengeance, he laid plans through the emperor's eunuchs to destroy Aëtius..." (*fr.*200.1: Gordon trans., p.51).

Maximus then was said to have connived with **Valentinian III** at the murder of Aëtius. John of Antioch went on,

"The affairs of the western Romans were in confusion, and Maximus, a well-born man, powerful and twice consul, was hostile to Aëtius, the general of the forces in Italy. Because he knew that Heraclius, a eunuch who had the greatest influence with the emperor, was also hostile to Aëtius, he made an agreement with him with the same end in view (for both were striving to substitute their power for his). They persuaded the emperor that unless he quickly slew Aëtius, he would be slain by him. Because Valentinian was fated to come to grief by losing the defense of his office, he approved of the words of Maximus and Heraclius and contrived the death of Aëtius when he was about to consult him in the palace on his resolutions and was examining proposals to bring in money. While Aëtius was laying the matter of the revenues before him ... Valentinian jumped up with a cry from his seat and said he would no longer stand being abused by such treacheries... He attacked with Heraclius, for this fellow was carrying a cleaver under his cloak (for he was primicerius sacri cubiculi). Both of them together directed their blows against the head of Aëtius and killed him... After he had been put to death, the emperor asked a knowledgeable person, "Was not the death of Aëtius well accomplished?" He answered, "Whether well or not I do not know, but I do know that you have cut off your right hand with your left" "(fr.200-201: Gordon trans., pp.51-52)

Maximus then hoped for advancement of his own. John continued,

"After Aëtius' removal, Maximus constantly resorted to Valentinian so that he might be advanced to the consular office. Failing that, he wished to attain the rank of patrician, but Heraclius did not acquiesce in his possession of this dignity. Acting from the same ambition, Heraclius thwarted the ambitions of Maximus and persuaded Valentinian that having freed himself from the oppression of Aëtius he should not transfer that man's power to others "(ibid.).

In fact, it is not known who, if anyone at all, succeeded to Aëtius' position, which may have remained vacant until the accession of the emperor **Avitus** (455-456).

ACCESSION

Eventually Maximus, disappointed in every regard, took out his frustrations on the emperor himself:

"Maximus, failing in both his hopes, was bitterly angry. He summoned Optila and Thraustila, brave Scythians who had campaigned with Aëtius and had been assigned to attend on Valentinian, and talked to them. He gave and received guarantees, put the blame for Aëtius' murder on the emperor, and urged that the better course would be to take revenge on them. Those who avenged the fallen man, he said, would justly have the greatest blessings. Not many days later, Valentinian rode in the Field of Ares with a few bodyguards and the followers of Optila and Thraustila. When he had dismounted from his horse and proceeded to archery, Optila and his friends attacked him. Optila struck Valentinian on his temple and when turned around to see the striker he dealt him a second blow on the face and felled him, and Thraustila slew Heraclius. Taking the emperor's diadem and horse, they hastened to Maximus... "(John of Antioch fr.201.4-5: Gordon trans., pp.52-53).

Valentinian's assassination took place on 16 March 455. There was no obvious successor to the throne, and several candidates surfaced. John of Antioch continued:

"Rome was in a state of confusion and disturbance, and the military forces were divided among themselves, some wishing Maximus to assume the royal power and some eager to give the throne to Maximianus, the son of Domninus, an Egyptian merchant who had made his fortune in Italy; Maximianus had held the position of domesticus [bodyguard] of Aëtius. In addition, Eudoxia, the wife of Valentinian, strongly favored Majorian. But Maximus gained control of the palace by distributing money and forced Eudoxia to marry him by threatening her with death, thinking that his position would be more secure. So Maximus came to the leadership of the Roman Empire" (fr.201.6: Gordon trans., pp.113-114)

Other sources provide briefer accounts of Maximus' accession. The chronicler Marcellinus observed, "The emperor Valentinian, by a ruse of the patrician Maximus, by whose trickery Aëtius himself had perished, was cut down in the Campus Martius by Optila and Thraustila, comrades of Aëtius. This same Maximus seized power..." According to the chronicler Prosper, who seems to have been in Rome at the time, "After this parricide had been perpetrated, Maximus, a man with a double consulate and the patrician dignity, obtained the rule... He not only did not punish the murderers of Valentinian, but he even received them in friendship, and after a few days he compelled Valentinian's wife [Eudoxia], who had been forbidden to grieve the loss of her husband, to marry him." The African chronicler Victor of Tonnena likewise recalled, "Maximus, a patrician and ex-consul, assumed the imperial power for seventy-seven days. Then the evil that had lain hidden became clear. Soon he took in marriage the widow of the emperor Valentinian, not allowing her to grieve for her husband" (s.a.455).

Maximus would have been in his late fifties when, on 17 March 455, he became emperor. He would have had little choice in the pardoning of **Valentinian's** murderers, especially if soldiers were involved, for he would have had no army of his own, and he would have had to cobble together whatever military support he could. Indeed, the support given him by Aëtius' soldiers is difficult to explain in light of the reports that Maximus himself was involved in Aëtius' death: either he was not as involved as court gossips might have claimed, or he was able to find some means, perhaps of the pecuniary kind, of satisfying Aëtius' supporters.

POLICIES

Little is known of Maximus' imperial policies. Needless to say, he was not recognized by the east. His marriage to Eudoxia attests to his desire to attach himself to the family of Valentinian in an effort to strengthen his claims to legitimacy. In a similar vein, he made his son Palladius Caesar and married him to one of **Valentinian's** daughters, possibly **Eudocia** . In Gaul, he appointed **Eparchius Avitus**, his colleague as prefect in 439, as Magister militum praesentalis ("Master of Soldiers in Attendance") and sent him to Toulouse to secure the loyalty of the Visigoths. Maximus also was later described as the "patronus" of another Gaul, Serranus, a further indication of his attempts to obtain extra-Italian support.

Maximus' attempts to secure the loyalty of the army also may be reflected in the relatively large amount of gold coinage that he struck at Rome for such a short reign. The use of a pearl diadem rather than rosettes on the imperial effigy may indicate a desire to establish his own identity. A small issue of gold at Ravenna not only demonstrates that his rule was recognized there, but also is unusual in that it was customary for gold only to be issued at the city in which the emperor was residing. Maximus issued no known silver or bronze coinage.

CONSERVATION OF MONUMENTS

From the beginning of the 4th century, the monuments of Rome, and more generally all buildings of some value that were in a state of neglect for various reasons, were increasingly used as quarries for valuable building materials. This practice, in fact, was cheaper and more convenient than import from remote locations, which was sometimes rendered difficult or impossible by the control of the sea by the Vandals, officials conceded upon petition the use for construction of marble, stone and brick recovered from demolition of ancient monuments:

“Hence the occasion now arises that also each and every person who is constructing a private edifice through the favoritism of the judges who are situated in the City, does not hesitate to take presumptuously and to transfer the necessary materials from the public places, although those things which belong to the splendor of the cities ought to be preserved by civic affection, even under the necessity of repair.” —*Novella Maioriani* 4, Clyde Pharr (ed.), *The Theodosian code: and Novels* The Lawbook Exchange, Ltd.,
To cope with this phenomenon, Majorian promulgated a law, *Novella Maioriani* 4, *De aedificiis pubblicis* ("Public Buildings"), in Ravenna on 11 July 459, addressed to Aemilianus, praefactus urbi of Rome. The punishment for judges who had allowed the destruction of ancient public buildings was 50 pounds of gold, while their subordinates were whipped and had both hands amputated. Those who had removed materials from public buildings were to return them. The Senate had the power to decide whether there were extreme conditions that justified the demolition of an old building and, if it decided for the demolition, the Emperor still had the right to order that the resulting materials should be used to decorate other public buildings.

DEPOSITION AND DEATH

Regarding later developments, the Byzantine chronicler Malchus reported,

"Around this time [455], the empress Eudoxia, the widow of the emperor Valentinian and the daughter of the emperor Theodosius and Eudocia, remained unhappily at Rome and, enraged at the tyrant Maximus because of the murder of her spouse, she summoned the Vandal Gaiseric, king of Africa, against Maximus, who was ruling Rome. He came suddenly to Rome with his forces and captured the city, and having destroyed Maximus and all his forces, he took everything from the palace, even the bronze statues. He even led away as captives surviving senators, accompanied by their wives; along with them he also carried off to Carthage in Africa the empress Eudoxia, who had summoned him; her daughter Placidia, the wife of the patrician Olybrius, who then was staying at Constantinople; and even the maiden Eudocia. After he had returned, Gaiseric gave the younger Eudocia, a maiden, the daughter of the empress Eudoxia, to his son Huneric in marriage, and he held them both, the mother and the daughter, in great honor "(Chron. 366).

In summoning the Vandals, **Eudoxia** would have been emulating **Valentinian's** sister **Honoria**, who was said to have summoned Attila and the Huns just a few years earlier.

Prosper graphically described Maximus' end:

"But he did not enjoy such incontinence for long. For in his second month of rule, the approach of king Gaiseric from Africa was announced, and when many panicked crowds fled from the city, when he himself also fearfully desired to depart, having given everyone the liberty to flee, he was butchered by the imperial slaves on his seventy-seventh day of rule [22 May 455]. His dismembered body was cast into the Tiber, and he did not have a tomb."

Victor of Tonnena likewise continued,

"But worse things followed upon this wickedness [the forced marriage to Eudoxia] when Maximus feared the arrival of Gaiseric, king of the Vandals, and he gave freedom to all those wishing to flee the city. But before he could accomplish the flight that he himself was contemplating he was killed and thrown into the Tiber River torn limb from limb. On the third day after Maximus was killed, Gaiseric, king of the Vandals, entered Rome and during fourteen whole days denuded the city of all its riches and took with him the daughters and wife of Valentinian and many thousands of captives. The intercession of Pope Leo restrained him from arson, torture, and murder "(s.a.455).

Even Victor indicates that the Vandals did not commit "Vandalism" during their genteel sack of Rome. And one presumes that Maximus' son **Palladius** died at the same time as his father.

According to Hydatius, moreover, Maximus not only feared the popular tumult, but also was implicated both in the murders committed by Valentinian and in Valentinian's own murder. He then desired to abdicate ("*cum imperium deserere vellet*"), and was killed in a military sedition as he tried to flee. The Gallic Chronicle of 511 says more succinctly, "Maximus held power for seventy days, for he was killed in a crowded tumult during the Vandal terror, and soon Gaiseric looted Rome, having entered without fire and sword." Jordanes added, "Indeed, Maximus, while he was fleeing, was killed by a certain Ursus, a Roman soldier" ("Maximus vero fugiens a quodam Urso, milite Romano, interemptus est": Getica 235). And Sidonius makes the cryptic comment, regarding Maximus' murder, "the Burgundian, with his traitorous leadership, extorted the panic-fury that led to an emperor's slaughter" ("... infidoque tibi Burdundio ductu / extorquet trepidas mactandi principis iras": Carm. 7.742-743).

The identity of this "faithless Burgundian" whom Sidonius declines to name and whose actions created the panic that led to Maximus' death is unknown. But it would seem quite likely, given that none of Maximus' Italian generals except for the Count of the Domestics Majorian are known, that this Burgundian was one of Maximus' generals, perhaps even a Master of Soldiers of Gaul, who somehow failed to do his duty. Two Burgundian leaders at this time were Chilperic and Gundioc, who accompanied the Visigothic king Theodoric in his invasion of Spain in late 455 (Jordanes, Getica 231). One or the other of these might be the Burgundian about whom Sidonius had special knowledge and who earlier in 455 played a role, even if only by failing to perform his duty, in Maximus' fall. Gundioc, it might be noted, was serving in the office of Master of Soldiers of Gaul by 463.

Meanwhile, two days after Maximus' death, on 24 May, the Vandals entered Rome, and the city then experienced a leisurely fourteen-day sack that removed much of value that the Visigoths had missed in 410. The imperial palace was stripped, churches were despoiled, even half of the roof of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus was taken. Also seized were the spoils taken from Jerusalem by Titus in the year 73. At least one of the spoil-laden vessels sank on the return to Carthage, and awaits modern discovery.

Soon thereafter, in Gaul, Maximus' appointee **Avitus** was himself proclaimed emperor. Ironically, it was Avitus' son-in-law, the Gallo-Roman poet Sidonius Apollinaris who, writing to the aforementioned Serranus (Epist. 2.13), pronounced an epitaph on Maximus,

"I received your letter dedicated to the praises of your patron, the emperor Maximus... You call him "most happy" because he passed through the highest offices of state and died an emperor. I can never agree with the opinion that those men should be called happy who cling to the steep and slippery summits of the state... He, although he had climbed up into the high offices of prefect, patrician, consul, and had, with unsatisfied ambition, claimed a second turn in some of these offices, nevertheless when he arrived still vigorous at the top of the imperial precipice, felt his head swim with dizziness under the diadem, and could no more endure to be the master of all than he had before endured to be under a master. Think of the popularity, the authority, the permanence of his former manner of life, and compare them with the origin, the tempestuous course, the close of his two-months' sovereignty, and you will find that the least happy portion of his life was that in which you style him "most happy." So it came to pass that ... when he had been hailed as Augustus, and with that vain show of majesty had been shut up, a virtual prisoner, within the palace walls, he lamented before twilight came the fulfillment of his ambitious hopes. Now a host of cares forbade him to indulge in his former measure of repose, he had suddenly to break off all his old rules of life, and perceived when it was too late that the business of an emperor and the ease of a senator could not go together. Moreover, the worry of the present did not blind him to the calamities that were to come, for he who had trodden the round of all his other courtly dignities with tranquil step, now found himself the powerless ruler of a turbulent court, surrounded by tumults of the legionaries, tumults of the populace, tumults of the barbarian allies, and the forebodings thus engendered were but too surely justified when the end came, an end quick, bitter, and unexpected, the last perfidious stroke of fortune, which had long fawned upon the man, and now suddenly turned and stung him to death with a scorpion's tail. A man of letters, who by his talents well deserved the rank that he bore of quaestor (I mean Fulgentius), used to tell me that he had often heard Maximus say, when cursing the burden of empire and regretting his old freedom from cares, "Ah, happy Damocles! It was only for one banquet's space that you had to endure the necessity of reigning"" [Translation based upon Hodgkin, Italy, pp.223-225].

EPILOGUE

The reign of Petronius Maximus brought to an end the dynasty of Valentinian and Theodosius, which had provided stability ever since 364, even during the troubled years of the fifth century under **Honorius** (395-423) and **Valentinian III** (425-455). Maximus was the first of the so-called "shadow" emperors who would oversee the last years of the western Roman Empire. Already with the death of Aëtius in 454, the chronicler Count Marcellinus opined, "And with him died the western empire, nor since then has it been able to recover." And as for Maximus' own legacy, the historian Priscus did not deign even to mention his name, merely commenting, "There were, moreover, still other emperors in the west, but although I know their names well, I shall make no mention of them whatsoever. For it so fell out that they lived only a short time after attaining the office, and as a result of this accomplished nothing worthy of mention..." (*Bellum Vandalicum* 7.15-17: Dewing trans., p.69)

The Vandal Sack of Rome, 455.

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